

COMMUNITY COLLEGE MISSIONS IN THE 1980s

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It is not easy to define the purpose and mission of community colleges today -- not nearly as easy as it was in the 1960s when community colleges were in high agreement on a common purpose and a national mission to open the doors of higher education to previously unserved segments of the population. Once the doors have been opened, however, and those previously unserved students are in attendance, what is the goal? Is it, for example, to retain students until they have completed some defined set of learning experiences that constitutes a "program" of study? Or is it to provide local residents with the educational services that fit their changing needs throughout their lives? How important is retention, and what constitutes "reasonable progress" in a community college? Are community colleges failing in their task when students drop in, take a few courses to satisfy immediate needs, and then drop out? How important is the transfer function? Should community/junior colleges emphasize the "junior" college role, providing the link between high schools and four-year colleges? Or should they emphasize the "community" college function, providing the link between education and jobs, family, and other adult responsibilities?

The answers to these questions depend heavily on what community colleges are trying to do. The easy way out of the goals problem is one that was used with reasonable success by most community colleges in the 1960s and '70s -- to embrace comprehensiveness. The problem with the comprehensive mission is that carrying it out with quality suggests that all five of the basic functions

that constitute the comprehensive community college must be done well. The transfer program must prepare students just as well as the university does for upper division work. Vocational programs must prepare students for entry-level jobs, as well as advancement in their chosen occupations. Remedial programs must actually ameliorate past educational inequities and give students the tools for lifelong learning. General education must develop a wholistic and integrated framework for understanding and using knowledge. Community education must respond appropriately to the educational needs of a wide range of people and organizations.

Can any college perform all of those functions with excellence -- or even adequately in today's climate of scarce resources and heavy competition for students? Are there some functions that should not be provided and some people who should not be served -- at least not by a given community college?

These are the internal questions about community college mission that colleges ask themselves, questions about curriculum, clientele, instruction, and priorities. They are the questions addressed in The American Community College by the UCLA team of Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer.

There is another set of issues, however, surrounding community college mission that I shall call the external questions. These are questions about the role of community colleges in a system of education, their relationship to other colleges, their distinctiveness in higher education. Such questions are frequently considered in the statehouse rather than on campus. The following are examples of external questions, bearing on the mission of community colleges: Should institutions be free to develop new programs in response to market demands, or should a strict "division of labor" be established by state plan? For example, should four-year colleges be permitted to develop associate degrees? If excess capacity now exists in four-year public

colleges, would resources be better utilized if full-time undergraduates planning on baccalaureate degrees were encouraged to start in four-year institutions rather than in community colleges? What purpose does the tuition differential between two-and four-year colleges serve? Does it reflect differences in cost or quality? Is it a response to differences in student income, or is it intended to attract students to lower priced institutions?

These are questions addressed by another recent book on community colleges, Financing Community Colleges: An Economic Perspective by David Breneman and Susan Nelson, economists at the Brookings Institute when the book was written. The book is actually broader in scope than is suggested by the title. The authors give considerable thought to the missions and priorities of community colleges, reasoning that "Little progress can be expected toward resolving the fundamental issues in financing community colleges until broad agreement is reached about the purpose and functioning of these two-year colleges " (p. 39).

These are two quite different books addressing the broad topic of mission from refreshingly different perspectives. Cohen and Brawer are long-time authorities on community colleges; Breneman and Nelson are newcomers. Financing Community Colleges is a coolly rational policy analysis; the American Community College is an "interpretive analysis" (p. xvi) authored by writers with "strong convictions" (p. xi). Financing Community Colleges is a 200 page book prepared as a special research study; The American Community College is a 445 page synthesis of the literature on community colleges since 1965.

Neither together nor separately do these two books answer the challenging questions they raise, but in different ways they manage to throw some light and generate some heat on the critical questions of community college missions.

Cohen and Brawer are, at heart, traditionalists, writing about community colleges in an era, 1965-1980, when the non-traditionalists appeared to be winning. Thus they have much to say about where community colleges, and most other institutions of higher education as well, went astray. The essence of their criticism of community colleges is captured best in this ringing denunciation:

A publicly supported college cannot operate indefinitely with the curriculum perceived as a set of haphazard events, a corps of part-time instructors with no commitment to the institution in general, let alone to the planning of curriculum in particular, and students who drop in casually if they have nothing better to do that week. Such an institution may continue functioning, but it has lost its guiding ethos (p. 329).

Their solution follows in the next sentence:

A general education that leads to the ways of knowing and the common beliefs and language that bind a society together is offered in every culture through rituals, schools, apprenticeships. The community colleges are responsible for furthering it in the United States (p. 329).

Cohen and Brawer don't really discuss why community colleges, rather than, say, high schools or universities, have a special obligation to further the goals of general education. Rather, they latch onto general education as the integrating mechanism that will pull the diverse programs of community colleges together and make a coherent curriculum. A carefully planned model for making general education the mission of community colleges is presented in Chapter 12. Cohen and Brawer never question the comprehensive mission; instead they advocate preserving it by placing general education for the informed citizen at the hub of career, compensatory, collegiate, and community education. Such education would be "holistic, not specialized; integrative, not fractionated; suitable more for action than for contemplation" (p. 312).

These implied criticisms of traditional discipline-oriented liberal arts programs, make it clear that they are not pushing the transfer program as first among equals in the comprehensive mission, although traditional undergraduate education has more of the characteristics they admire than, say, community education which they perceive as ad hoc, uncoordinated, and lacking in standards (p. 275).

Cohen and Brawer's answers to the questions of internal or curricular mission are clear. They want a "program" of studies, a sequence of courses, and an end to "serving up a pastiche of uncoordinated functions to the masses" (p. 275).

The heat of their language is probably generated by the tendency, at least between 1965 and 1980, for community colleges to move toward becoming community-based learning centers, a mission advocated by Edmund Gleazer who retired in 1980, after serving as Executive Director and President of the American Association for Community and Junior Colleges for 25 years. Gleazer suggested that community colleges should sharply differentiate their function from that of four-year colleges by deemphasizing the transfer function and expanding their services to part-time, non-degree seeking adults. The emphasis would be more on "community" than on "college" said Gleazer.

Cohen and Brawer are unsympathetic to the Gleazer vision, but instead of describing it, as one would expect from a "comprehensive study" of community colleges they barely mention Gleazer, who was undeniably an important figure in community college education between 1965 and 1980. This is one of the disturbing characteristics of this book. Authors are entitled to their own biases, but this book is organized and presented as a textbook. Chapter headings, such as Students, Faculty, Career Education, Collegiate Functions, Community Education, etc., lead the reader to believe that a comprehensive, reasonably objective picture of that facet of community college education is

going to be presented, but the five chapters describing programs are especially heavily laced with value judgements that the uninitiated reader (e.g., graduate students) may not detect. Actually, the best chapters in the book are those that are most frankly and openly the opinions of the authors, namely the chapter on General Education and the final chapter on "The Social Role," which is an articulate, well-written response to the critics of community colleges.

Cohen and Brawer are good critics, and when they present both sides of the argument, they are very good indeed at defending their position. Perhaps that talent explains one of the strangest characteristics of this book by two authors who are well acquainted with the literature on community colleges. Their knowledge and handling of the critics of community colleges is far better than their handling of the literature of the "leaders" of community colleges. Much of the classical literature on community colleges is all but ignored, while the critical literature is sought out and probed like a tongue worrying a sore tooth.

A second observation about the type of literature reviewed concerns the heavy dependence of Cohen and Brawer on the resources of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, where Cohen serves as Director and Brawer as Staff Writer. Their extensive use of ERIC materials has the advantage of bringing many little-known writings to the attention of readers, but it seems to be at the expense of exposing readers to the ideas and contributions of major writers in the field. Even when major authors are cited, it is frequently for obscure writings, dutifully retrieved from the bowels of ERIC rather than for major books, which are usually not in the ERIC files.

Almost as if they recognized their tendency to ignore major books on community colleges, Cohen and Brawer added an annotated bibliography. While people can argue over which books should be included, the grouping of books under

headings of "Institutions," "People," and "Functions" reveals Cohen and Brawer's apparent lack of familiarity with books. Even superficial attention to titles should have prevented such obvious errors as classifying Medsker and Tillery's Breaking the Access Barriers: A Profile of Two Year Colleges and Thornton's The Community Junior College under "People" while placing Cross's Beyond the Open Door: New Students to Higher Education under "Institutions."

Breneman and Nelson bring a very different style to their task of discussing the tension between the missions of community colleges and financial policy. A good example of the contrasting styles of these two books can be found in the handling of the Gleazer proposal for community-based learning centers, which was a rather powerful movement in the 1970s, and remains influential in certain places today. Breneman and Nelson give the Gleazer proposal a good objective examination, looking for both strengths and weaknesses. They write, "It seems to be moving with the times, opening up new areas for educational effort just as the traditional college-age population begins to decline. The potential for lifelong learning is immense and only partially tapped, and community colleges are well-placed geographically and philosophically to develop further this educational frontier . . . The only drawback is the distinct possibility that the necessary financial support for community learning centers will not be forthcoming" (p. 215).

This analysis is typical of the Breneman and Nelson book. They set out, not to decide what community colleges should do, but to explore the options. Breneman and Nelson observed as they started their study that there are two central tenets of the community college philosophy -- that "virtually no educational activity short of graduate education and advanced research should be off limits to community colleges, and that students' tuition costs should be

as close to zero as possible" (p. 4). They end up questioning the validity of both assumptions.

After examining the evidence and considering the alternatives -- and Breneman and Nelson are very good indeed at both -- they conclude that community colleges probably can't do it all. They write, "Perhaps the greatest risk of an unflinching commitment to the comprehensive mission is that sufficient financial support will not materialize, and the college will suffer across the board, becoming less competitive and less distinctive in all program areas. To opt for comprehensiveness is to gamble that sufficient support will be forthcoming to render unnecessary hard choices among program priorities" (p. 213).

They favor an "educational division of labor" among state supported institutions which boils down to greater differentiation of mission between two- and four-year colleges. Their most controversial recommendation, in community college circles at least, favors a policy that "would result in the community colleges enrolling fewer full-time academic transfer students of traditional college age and retaining a dominant position in those activities that four-year institutions have not undertaken traditionally and are likely to do less well" (p. 212). Specifically, those activities would be serving non-traditional populations with career education, community education, remedial/developmental education and other programs not typically addressed by more traditional four-year institutions.

Their recommendation regarding the second sacred tenet of community colleges -- low or no tuition -- also made them few friends among community college educators. But the Breneman and Nelson approach to the emotional issue of tuition is, like the rest of their book, grounded in evidence, and subjected to logical analysis.

They recommend that "Tuition for academic courses and most vocational-technical offerings should be well above zero but less than full cost, with subsidies provided by both local and state governments" (p. 203).

Financing Community Colleges is essentially a policy study. It is carefully researched and well written, and contains excellent up-to-date information. Its great strength lies in the ability of the authors to take a detached view and to consider finances in the broad context of public policy and community college missions. The book contains a splendid chapter on the history and economics of community colleges, two highly readable chapters on the concepts of efficiency and equity written for non-economists, and excellent discussions of national, state, and local roles in the financing of community colleges.

These two books are welcome additions to the literature on community colleges. Neither one addresses fully the provocative questions now being raised about the missions of community colleges. Both, however, will usually enlighten, often challenge, and occasionally provoke readers interested in higher education.